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ABSTRACT

The philosophy and operation of a group home for adolescent girls with severe behavior problems are described. The history of Mary Bartelme Homes is traced, and the program's major foci of strengthening the girls' ego functioning, building good relationships with adults, and making the girls aware of the reality consequences of their actions are discussed. Seven program aspects are considered: the staffing arrangement, the staff attitude, the administrative organization, the activity program, the community's relationship, the school program, and the formal treatment (either group or individual therapy). (CL)

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THE MANAGEMENT OF ANTISOCIAL AND AGGRESSIVE BEHAVIOR IN A GROUP HOME SETTING

by

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Adolescent girls who demonstrate antisocial and aggressive behavior in the community often comprise a clientele that is typically difficult to place. The problem often seems to be one in which their behavior is severe enough that they are moved from place to place frequently and in relatively brief periods of time, but not severe enough for them to be placed in psychiatric hospital settings for any but the briefest of stays. Closed residential treatment settings could be an option, but there are not many of these in Illinois and those that do exist have very long waiting lists, are available only to privately funded clients, or serve only the pre-adolescent. The matter is further complicated by the fact that these are adolescent girls and that this collective group often presents more disturbance and management problems than boys from similar backgrounds and similar experiences.[1] Proverbially speaking, these girls fall between the cracks of the delivery systems available to troubled adolescents.

It was the awareness of this situation that led Mary Bartelme Homes to set up the Dover Special Care Program, a group home, in 1976 to try to meet the needs of these specific girls. This paper will focus on the experiences of this one group home, and another similar one that was opened in 1978, in working with these girls and demonstrate how its experiences can be applied and duplicated elsewhere. The name of the program stems from the habit of the agency of naming its facilities after the street on which they are located. Dover House is thus located on Dover Street. The major problem facing this program was how to deal with the behavior demonstrated by thees girls in an open community setting, when this specific

type of behavior often leads to their exclusion from the community. We knew we were asking for trouble, but the need was there, so we decided to give it a try.

Before I launch into a discussion of the Dover House program, however, I should provide you with a brief background of Mary Bartelme Homes. Mary Bartelme Homes has been in existence in one form or another since 1863. From its beginning, it has provided services exclusively to adolescent girls and young women. It is also no stranger to the field of group home care, opening its first one in 1914 in Chicago. Ever since, group homes have been a major part of the array of programs and services it has offered and continues to offer to adolescent girls. Currently, Mary Bartelme Homes provides services to approximately 200 adolescent girls, ranging from a program for adolescent mothers to a supervised independent living program, to an extensive group home program. Included in these services is a program for adolescent girls still living in their own homes or in foster homes, but requiring some support systems to remain there. Dover House is part of the group home program which has a total capacity of 77 girls spread amoung nine houses and one apartment. The apartment houses five girls, seven group homes can house eight girls each, one group home houses six girls and the remaining home houses 10 girls.

These ten homes are divided into three kinds of programs. Two of them work with girls who are preparing to go into a supervised independent living program. They focus on teaching the girl the skills she will need to live independently and prepare her for that eventuality, by assisting her in getting a job, setting up a savings account and buying things she will need in her apartment. The second kind of program is set up for the girl who is not nearly ready for independent living (because of

age or other factors) and requires a long term (1 to 3 years) placement to enable her to continue her psychosocial development, and enable her to return to her family, go into some sort of foster care arrangement, or become self-sufficient enough to live independently. The third type of program includes the Dover House program which works with girls whose aggressive and antisocial behavior has precluded their ability to function in society. Their behavior also makes them very difficult to manage in the context of the other group home programs. Hopefully, the girls will graduate from this program within one year and may be placed in the regular group home program, supervised independent living program, their own families, or some sort of foster care arrangement. Quite possibly, long-term psychiatric hospitalization or placement in a closed residential setting may also be indicated.

A few definitions seem to be in order before I proceed further. What is a group home? A group home is a community-based facility that provides a group living arrangement for its clientele. The facility itself is often a large house that blends in with the other buildings in the community surrounding it. It can house anywhere between five and twelve clients (Dover House has a capacity of eight) and has a strong treatment component built into its programmatic structure. It is an open setting in the sense that the doors are not locked to keep the clients in (hence there is a great deal of freedom of movement) and that it actively seeks out programs and events that occur in the community and involves its clients in them. It attempts to set up an atmosphere and milieu that is as "homey" as possible.

One other question that may be needed to be answered is "what do I mean by 'Aggressive" and 'Antisocial' behavior"? Aggressive behavior is defined

as assaultive behavior and can occur verbally, physically or both. The assault may be against peers and/or adults and may or may not involve the use of a weapon. Antisocial behavior refers to regular drug usage (including marijuana and alcohol), theft, prostituiton and chronic runaway (once every two weeks and for periods of time exceeding three days). Most of the girls exhibiting these behaviors often show more than one at the same time.

Before one can build a program, one must first have some theoretical framework of hypothesis within which one is working. Since ideally all theory is subject to change based on the experience that accompanies its application, what I am about to present is a combination of the theory with which we started the program, and the changes that we have found necessary to build into it as we went along. There are three major areas of focus that govern the program: ego strengthening, relationship building, and reality leasing. I shall cover each of these areas in detail.

The primary goal of the program is to strengthen the functioning of the ego in the girls with whom we work. According to Erikson[2], the ego functions in a three-dimensional way: it balances the demands of the id and the opposing one of the superego and tries to relate this balancing act to the reality that confronts it. Thus, the ego is faced with a balancing act not only up and down, but also back and forth. The balanced personality is one whose ego stays in the middle and works out compromises that placate the id, the superego and the external reality. Its major task is to seek and preserve internal order within the individual. At times this may mean it will have to impose some sort of order on the reality outside of it, and at other times it will have to compromise and delay the internal demands made upon it. The well-balanced ego has a high degree of flexibility demanded of it to meet

whatever situation that may come it. Of course, when the flexibility demanded of it becomes too great, there may follow some disintegration of the personality and major repair work would be required. A weak ego is one that does not have the energy or power to maintain this balancing act and hence fails in maintaining the balance or careens violently from one place to another.[3] It usually goes to where the pull is the strongest, or it aligns itself with one part of the conflicting forces as a defensive measure against the pull of any of the other parts. Thus, the weak ego may be aligned at one time with the id, at another time with the superego, and still at another time with the reality impinging upon it; or it may permanently align itself with the id, the superego, or with reality. The balance of power in any case is upset and the personality is in trouble. Aggressive and/or antisocial behaviors may result, and the self-concept that the person develops is one of a weak and worthless person who can exercise no control over her life and even when she tries, is doomed to fail. The girls taken into the Dover House program demonstrate this ego weakness to a great extent.

In the case where the girl is pulled from pillar to post, so to speak, we are confronted with a helpless personality who feels that she cannot exert control over what happens to her. She thus becomes somewhat erratic in terms of her behavior, at times involved in antisocial activities, at other times refusing to become involved in them and at sitll other times depressed and morose about all the things she has done, sometimes to the point of existential panic (suicide). This type of girl has nothing to hang on to, nothing on which to ground her ego and no support from which it can draw its strength and power. Periods of prostitution and runaway coupled with periods of great conformity and anxiousness to please are often signs of this type

of ego weakness.

In the cases where the ego has aligned itself with one or the other part of the personality, it is stronger than the first type, but no less battered. Its strength lies from the fact that it gathers its power from the part of the personality with which it aligns itself. Thus, in situations where it aligns itself with the id, the ego spends much of its time forcing the external realities to meet the impulses and pleasure-seeking drives of the id. The superego is, to a great extent, though not completely, dominated. When the reality does not neet the demands of id-ego alliance a rage builds up and the ego seeks to vent the rage while at the same time getting the denied pleasure met. When this meets increased resistance from the reality outside of the personality the efforts redouble and so on in an upward spiral. At some point, violence occurs as the ego strives to force reality to meet the needs of its alliance and there is some sort of primitive relief experienced. With this acting as a reinforcer, aggressiveness can become the only way the id-ego alliance can get gratification or at least release from the tension built up from the denial of gratification. It is usually at this point that the girl comes into the Dover Special Care Program.

Believe it or not, there are times when the ego lines up with the superego and the end result can also lead to violence. In this alliance, the ego draws its strength from the superego and views as a threat any activity on the part of the id, or anything in reality that may serve to gratify the id. The ego here strives to repress or eliminate these id gratifying reality factors. When repressing them, either by threatening or trying to ignore them, does not work, the ego strikes out in a violent fashion attempting to bring the threatening reality into control or to eliminate it from the perimeter of the ego altogether. While the power

of the superego feeds the ego, it cannot always withstand the onslaughts of the id and at times temporary personality disintegration may occur into something like a paranoid psychosis. This may be viewed as sort of a strategic retreat by the ego-superego alliance to recoup their strength and power to face the onslaughts once again. It is usally within these terms that the violence has occured and after several occasions of this, the girl may be admitted to Dover House.

In the third alliance, that of ego-reality, we often see a personality described as sociopathic. This person never really seems to get any gratification either for their id or their superego. They have instead developed a strong alliance with reality, in such a way that they become adept at manipulating it whenever the impulses of their id, or the compulsions of the superego threaten it. The sole purpose of their involvement with reality is to control these two forces of their personality. These personalities tend to become involved more in antisocial activities than aggressive ones, although if the threat becomes too great to the reality-ego alliance, violence could result. By the time they come to Dover House these girls with this type of ego-weakness have frustrated people in all their previous placements to the point where either they have run away or they have been removed upon demand.

As you can see, if these problems were all that we had to deal with, we would have our work cut out for us. But there is more to add, and that is ego-growth. Just as the body grows and ages no matter what we do to it along the way, so does the ego. According to Erikson[4], adolescence is the time of the resolution of the Identity vs. Role Confusion crisis for the ego. This crisis appears no matter where the ego is in terms of resolution of its previous crises. It is a time when the ego is faced with the task

of forging together all the previous identifications it had in its earlier years and from this set forth as a new personality. I believe that this stage is important and essential because it is from the resolution of this crisis that the ego will draw the power it will need to continue its balancing act. Up to this time, the ego has drawn its power from its identificands and has used them to maintain its balance. Now it is getting ready to go on its own, if it is successful. You must have guessed by now, that given where our girls are in terms of their ego functioning and the fact that their ego is already very weak, that our task will be difficult, if not impossible, when this particular stage of ego development is mixed in. Yet, in one sense, the crisis itself can be used to help strengthen the ego, and there is the real possibility that both a strengthening of the ego and the successful resolution of this developmental crisis can occur.

The second focus of the program at Dover House is on relationship buiiding. It is obvious from our statements above on ego development and weakness that these girls have not had good relationships with adults in their past. If we believe that the ego draws much of its power from its identificands in earlier stages of development, and that the identificands for these girls were inadequate to give their egos the power they needed, then it follows that we must establish identificands that can provide their egos the power it needs until it is able to stand on its own. Establishing relationships with the staff at Dover House is the primary way we have of doing this. The ego cannot be strengthened except in the terms of a positive relationship with an adult and this we strive to attain. If we could look at it in terms of the ego, we have a weak and somewhat frightened ego entering into the milieu of Dover House and it finds itself surrounded by powerful balanced egos offering it a source of power from which it can

draw separate from what is has had up to now. Of course, the price that these powerful balanced egos demand is the establishing of some sort of dependency and identification. This is the choice that the ego has to make. It is a difficult one and not made without a struggle, thus patience and persistance on the part of the staff is required. There must also be the realization on the part of the staff that the weak ego they see may decide to reject what they offer and that this stems from the choice that the ego makes, not because of something they have done. In other words, the choice must be clear and it must be definitely made. Initial reactions before it has had a chance to explore the choice are not to be accepted as final, but one seen as a statement of position on the part of the ego that must be respected. This also means the staff must have a high tolerance for symptom manifestation.

The other factor that needs to be considered is that the girl's ego is frequently so damaged that it can never be made into a realization of its original potential. Experience has served to limit the potential of the ego even further. Thus, unrealistically high expectations of the ego can serve only to be more frustrating to the wounded ego and interfere with the establishment of a relationship.

The third focus of the program is on reality. All of the treatment that does occur, occurs with an emphasis on the current reality faced by the girl. This is not to denigrate the importance of the past history or experiences of the girl and its effect on her current struggles, but it is to refocus the ego on establishing the boundaries and balances that it needs to accomplish in the here-and-now. Therefore, we spend much time with the girls exploring these realities of expectations and deprivations that they have to deal with and provide them with constructive and alternative

methods of dealith with them. I suppose another way to look at this is to say that we work with the girls in terms of them accepting responsibility for what they do. This means that they must be made aware of the reality consequences their actions may bring about and they have to decide whether or not they want those consequences. Much of their behavior is geared toward avoiding consequences for the satisfaction of their id, superego or reality allies and we have to provide real consequences to them. We cannct allow the avoidance mechanism to work if their ego is to regain its balancing function.

To summarize then, the philosophical and theoretical underpinnings of the program rely on accomplishing these three foci -- ego strengthening, relationship forming, and reality based.

Now that I have outlined the theory of what it is we are trying to do and how we see the girls' problems, what does this mean in terms of practical application? This is accomplished by emphasizing seven areas of the milieu and how they are brought to bear onto the troubled egos mentioned above. Those areas are: the staffing arrangement, the staff attitude, the administrative back-up, the activity program, the community, the school, and the format treatment. Let us look at each of these in its turn, for I believe that focus on these areas can serve as a model for duplication of this program elsewhere.

The staffing arrangement. There almost always two staff persons at the house 24 hours a day, 7 days a week. Since my agency uses the shift concept in its group home program, there are two eight-hour and one nine-hour shifts that must be covered. They are covered by eight child care workers, one child care worker supervisor, and social worker/director and a Unit Director. Thus, there are nearly always two staff available to eight girls at any time

during the day. This double coverage arrangement is very important for the relationship-building focus of the program, for it provides the opportunities for staff to relate to the girls on a one-to-one basis at the time that they need it. Since these girls are very volatile, the time for this kind of intervention could occur at any time, but our experience seems to indicate that it occurs most frequently between 10 PM and 2 AM. The double coverage also provides immediate staff back-up whenever a situation develops where one staff member may need some assistance in maintaining control. Although it is expressed in terms of control and back-up I should caution you that power and control are not the issues with which we are dealing in working with these girls. Our goal is to provide ego-supportive and ego-strengthening activity to the girls. However, the damaged ego is not powerless and it can launch tremendous assaults against other egos that it may find threatening for whatever reason. The support of staff members for each other provide a second line of defense against the assault. Thus, when one staff member begins to feel overwhelmed under the assault of a girl, a second one is available to step in and help out. Paradoxical though this may seem, the girls derive some comfort from this arrangement in that it may put some of their omnipotent fears to rest and it demonstrates to them, that help is available and willing whenever they need it. The staff are also modeling ways of using their help to cope with stress.

The staff attitude. Our staff are hired knowing that they are going to be in difficult situations and expected to deal with them. In the hiring process we warn them that they will be confronted with situations that they will find difficult to deal with and that they must find some way to deal with them within the terms of the theoretical framework of the agency. Thus, we tell them that it is not unusual for them to have to break up knife fights between the girls, that the verbal abuse can be incredibly intense to the

point that many people cannot handle it, that one of our staff members had a girl hold a gun to her head at one time, and so on. We do not pretend that this job is easy. At the same time we do not want staff to have the attitude that this is a jail and that we are to be massive superegos squelching anything we may hear from a rebellious id. Thus, we are looking for someone who is tough, but sensitive to the ego needs of these girls and capable of responding to them.

Staff must be alert at all times while they are working. A house full of damaged egos can lead to some pretty nasty situations, some of which I have mentioned above. Staff must be alert to crises in the development stage and must take action then to forestall the development of a small tropical storm into a full-blown hurricane. Anticipation is important. Alertness to what is going on and the ability to divert the girl from the stressful situation into something that is easier for her to handle are attitudes and qualities essential for survival as a staff member in this program.

Staff must view themselves also as a team. It is my observation that, within limits, it does not so much matter what method of raising a child is used as whether or not that method is applied consistently. The same holds true in our program. Thus, it is essential that staff remain consistent across the board in dealing with the girls. Since this involves eleven different people, you can imagine that it can be accomplished only with some difficulty. The feeling and investment in teamwork is therefore essential. This is fostered through regular team meetings, frequent meetings across shifts by the social worker/director and an openness and trust among the staff of each other. We try to foster this by keeping

our turnover as low as possible. As part of this we ask for at least a year's commitment to the program from new employees and we have full-day retreats twice a year. This is in addition to our every other week meetings with the psychiatric consultant. The feeling of teamwork is essential because it is the only way that consistency can occur in the program. This consistency is important because it provides the egos of the girls a reference point that is constant and always present for them. Since their egos are frequently buffeted on the seas of challenge and counter-challenge this island of constancy is important and reassuring to them - a source of strength. If the staff can be manipulated or are seen as not being constant there is little that can appeal to them and certainly the feeling of refuge can be sabatoged. Finally, teamwork provides a source of support and comfort to the staff themselves and this helps their own egos withstand the constant battering that they get.

Administrative back-up. The Social Worker/Director and the Unit Director are available to the house for any situation that may come up 24 hours a day, 7 days a week. On weekends and after office hours, they are on-call to the house, whenever a staff person feels the need for some support in dealing with a difficult situation. The basic administrative approach is one in which the care of and treatment of these girls is the responsibility of the child care staff and the purpose of the administration is to make this as easy as possible. Therefore, there aren't a lot of rules at the house. In fact, there are only very few rules that are set down relating to fighting, weapons, destruction of property, drug use and curfew. The rest of the rules are made up by the staff and change as the girls change. In other words there is a lot of flexibility in terms of the day-to-day functioning of the program that enables the staff to devleop the relationships with the girls they need to in order that treatment can occur. The balance

between flexibility and consistency is one that is difficult to maintain, but needs to occur. Staff need to be flexible in their ability to respond to the needs of the girls, but they must be consistent in order for the girls to turn to them as a refuge in a sea of troubles. Both must be used when it can help in the overall goal of strengthening the ego of the girl.

The staff are also under a tremendous amount of psychic strain in working with these girls and they turn to administrative support in order to help them bear up under the assault. Administrative support also helps them to maintain their focus on developing relationships, reality basing and ego strengthening and to keep them from turning to power and control issues. Indeed, the administrator must constantly be on guard against the usurpation of the treatment modality by power and control issues. When these occur, they must be elimiated as soon as possible, since the girls have become quite adept at functioning at this level and they do not serve any purpose toward ego strengthening. They can only become ego-destructive and serve to undermine the whole treatment program. Administrative back-up is also provided through frequent training sessions where methods of reaching the goals of the program are explored and taught.

The activity program. One can imagine that a tremendous amount of energy is activated in all these ego struggles that are going on under one roof. A good outlet for this energy is some sort of planned and regular activity program. This kind of program also serves a role in strengthening the ego of the girls. In order for an activity program to accomplish this, it must be planned well in advance. This permits the girls to have plenty of time to prepare for it and it lends predictability to their lives. They should have some part in the planning process. The activity should occur when it is scheduled to occur. If this means only one or two girls show up or even

no girls, the staff should still implement the activity. Only in this way can the program demonstrate that it is serious about providing activities for the girls and emphasize to them the importance of follow through. A staff member should always accompany the girls on their activities. This fosters the development of relationships between the staff member and the girls by sharing experiences and it also provides someone to be there with them when a stress situation develops that may be too much for them to handle. The activity should be frequent and varied enough to foster interest and keep it for the girls. Activities should be planned and carried out with a view towards strengthening the ego functions of the girl. Thus, care should be taken with competitive sports that the girls achieve satisfaction out of the actual participation rather than winning. Careful planning should permit full participation of all the girls.

The community. The house is located within a community and often times that community's tolerance of deviance is far below that exhibited by the girls. Recognizing where they are in terms of the weakness of their egos, we cannot realistically expect them to conform to community standards everywhere and at all times. However, the effect of the reality basing is that they live in a community by the good graces of the community and they should respect the requirements and mores of the community while they are in it. Since the neighborhood in which the Dover House program is located is highly organized, we have taken the approach of joining the neighborhood block club and even occasionally host neighborhood meetings at the house with both staff and girls present. Complaints from the neighborhoods are taken with a great deal of seriousness and work is done intensively with the girls to keep on peaceful terms with the neighbors. The community has responded with support openly to the girls and to the staff. This acceptance

by the community has had the effect of further strengthening the girls' egos by giving them positive feedback on their efforts to control themselves. We have been able to use their acceptance by the neighbors of the girls with them to support their exercise of ego controls. Thus, rather than a negative force that may serve to interfere with a program, the community can be viewed as part of the treatment program itself and used to further the goals of the program.

The school. Ideally the school should mirror somewhat the attitudes and goals of the program. In the case of Dover House, the school program is set up to work with Behavior Disordered adolescents and hence has a high degree of tolerance for the behavior that they may show. These girls have often been excluded or suspended from their schools in the community, or they have simply refused to attend. The approach of the program in regards to education is one that is governed more by its reality basing orientation than anything else. Since many of these girls are functioning below the sixth grade level and since this is the level at which one can function adequately in society, the goal of the school program is more to raise their abilities to this level. The high level of symptom tolerance built into the school makes it virtually impossible for a girl to be excluded from the program, though she may be suspended for the rest of the day when her behavior becomes too disruptive. This willingness to persist in working with these girls has been very effective in obtaining their involvement in the educational program and has led to an improvement in their academic functioning. This focus on helping the girls function in society with at least a minimal degree of proficiency has helped them feel success and hence on their academic achievements.

The formal treatment. The final, but not the least, aspect of the milieu in this program is the formal treatment program devised for each girl by the Social Worker/Director. These fall into two categories -- group therapy and

individual therapy. Group therapy occurs twice a week, once with just the girls and the Social Worker/Director and once with the entire staff. Group therapy is viewed to be important becuase the girls are living in a group and the peer group in particular is very important to the adolescent in her attempt to work out her sense of identity. The groups can be very supportive to ego strengthening and can be very good at presenting the reality that often faces these girls with unpleasant choices. The meeting with the staff, known a community meeting, focuses on the problems that occur in the course of a group of people living together. These struggles and the ways we use of dealing with them are an integral part of our program and essential to the process of ego strengthening.

The Social Worker/Director also meets at least once a week with the girls in a formal therapeutic setting. The purpose of these sessions is not only to discuss with the girls the problems with which she must cope, but to consolidate the gains she has made. The approach is present and reality-oriented, providing the girl with the tools and strength she needs to develop a more balanced and successful ego. Of course, these goals are not limited to just the formal therapy sessions, but can occur at any time or under almost any circumstances when needed.

One final statement on the treatment program. When I speak of milieu, as I did earlier, I am referring to the fact that treatment within the environment of the program goes on all the time, day and night. It is intense, and intentionally so because we are attempting to heal some very damaged egos. The entire environment is set up in such a way to foster ego growth, strengthening and repair. It is my belief that only in this way can these girls attain the power their weak egos need to regain their balance. This wholistic approach provides us the tools we need to manage most of the aggressive and antisocial behavior we encounter. We view the behavior

as symptomatic of the weak ego, but behavior that must be managed, so that the ego of the girl has a chance to draw its strength from more stable forces. The features of the program I have described provide that.

FOOTNOTES

[1]Levine, Theodore. "Community-Based Treatment for Adolescents: Myths and Realities." Social Work 22(2) March, 1977, pp. 144-147.

[2]Erikson, Erik H. Childhood and Society. W.W. Norton & Company, Inc. New York, NY, 1963, pp. 193-194.

[3]Redl, Fritz and Wineman, David. Controls from Within. The Free Press, Glencoe, IL, 1952.

[4]Erikson, Erik H. Childhood and Society. W.W. Norton & Company, Inc. New York, NY, 1963, pp. 261-263.